

Lessons From the Practice

Gloria! . . . Glooooooria!

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We had 12 Christmases together. Every year around Christmas, she came to see me for her yearly visit. We would chat, and I'd hear about her husband and her little boy. Every time I'd see her, I noticed her inner strength and calm. Then we'd say our good-byes, and I would see her again only when her boy got a cold or when she had some minor ailment.

A few years after we met, her husband left her. During her divorce, she suffered greatly. He wanted to take the boy and move a long way away. We talked a long time at that visit, and she clutched her chart while we talked. When she left, there was a wet handprint on it and some teardrops that smudged my jottings from another visit. About a week later, her husband violated a restraining order, picked their boy up after school, and sped away. He was drunk and on drugs, and at an intersection he went through the stop sign. A large delivery truck, which had the right of way, swung wide but was unable to avoid hitting the car. Both the husband and son died.

I saw Gloria in the middle of the night in the emergency department. She called me, her only doctor, not wanting to see anyone else. She was wrung out. How can anyone cope with such a loss? She was vomiting up her grief. Why had this happened to her? I was honest and told her that I had no special insight into why these things happened. She accepted that. After some talk and some medicine, she took a few days off to rest and then went back to work. She invited me to the funerals, but I have a policy. I will attend only one funeral: mine. I wanted to go for her sake, but I couldn't.

When I next saw her, it was around Christmas again. She smiled, and I could see that she had done the short-term repair work. She was seeing a guy. "I've known you a long time now," she observed. "What's it been? Six years? I have nobody anymore. My parents died when I was young, and now I'm all alone. I count on you," she confided. I was honored.

I told her she could come see me any time, and I meant it. Gloria was a good person, and I wanted to help her in any way I could. A couple more years slipped by. When Gloria came for her next visit, she brought me a basket of pineapples and some chocolate macadamia nut fudge from Kauai, Hawaii. She had met another guy. He was kind and sweet and had a good job. They had spent ten days together in Hawaii. She showed me a few photographs. She seemed to glow like the sunset.

"My new guy? His name is Milton. He's really smart

and sells artist supplies. He's a painter, too." Then she unwrapped a painting. "It's called 'Kissing Fishes,' but it's us! Could you tell?" I hadn't heard giggles like that from her in years. It was a grand Christmas that year.

Another year passed and then another. Then she came in, looking worried. "I have a lump," she told me.

"How long?"

"It came in July."

"Why did you wait until December to come see me?"

I was mad, but held back.

"I don't know. I just hoped it would go away. Heck, with what's happened to me, there couldn't be any more bad, could there?"

I sank an 18-gauge needle into the center of the lump located in the upper outer quadrant of her left breast. As the needle went in, there was a gritty crunching, and I already knew the diagnosis. I think she did, too. The biopsy showed an undifferentiated cancer, and I sent her over to my surgeon. He took out the lump, but all of her lymph nodes were positive.

After half a year of irradiation, chemotherapy, and hoping, she had a disease-free interval of about 15 months. When she returned, I didn't need a complete blood count and SMA panel to tell me what was obvious. She was deeply jaundiced and could barely breathe. And she was tired of her medical ordeal. She couldn't tolerate any more IVs, and we talked for a long time. Her oncologist was an academic sort, and she couldn't talk much to him, so we talked about twice a week. Gloria was dying, drowning in her pulmonary secretions.

Milton painted all day long as she watched him, and I visited her every day. I scheduled my life around her life and took my kids to visit her. The kids took her illness hard because they remembered her as chunky and jovial and strong. They had grown up with Gloria, and she had grown up with them. Laura baked cookies with lots of nutrients and made Gloria milkshakes with almond flavoring. But Gloria continued to lose pounds and breath. She was tachypneic at rest and refused to let me do a chest x-ray. "I don't want to know anything. I just want to die," she said.

"Maybe you have an effusion. I can take it off with a needle, and you'll breathe better," I argued, but she tried to joke between gasps.

"An . . . eff . . . usion, huh? How could I . . . have any . . . thing more go wrong?"

(Oppenheim EB: Gloria! . . . Glooooooria! *West J Med* 1996; 165:85-86)

From CoMEDco, Inc, a Washington Corporation. Dr Oppenheim practiced family medicine before becoming a medical-legal consultant.
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I took off about a liter of fluid from both sides. She felt wonderful for about three weeks, but then she told me, "Look, I've had it. Do . . . you . . . get it?"

I gave her Nembutal [pentobarbital sodium] suppositories and morphine but told her that I couldn't do what she wanted. I instructed her in how to relieve her pain. She and Milton would take it from there, she gasped to me.

I sobbed all the way home, thinking she was gone. I couldn't stand the loss. But the next morning I got a call from Milton. "She's gonna stick this out. She says she can't leave at this time of the year. Weather's too good. She could use some magic, though. Got any more of those cookies?"

I invited a magician friend to go to her home with me and my kids and my office nurses, and with Milton, we celebrated her birthday with a real magic show. Her birthday wouldn't be for another six months, but she wanted a party, so we gave her one. She laughed quietly and enjoyed the 30-minute respite from reality.

She lasted only a few more days. All of us went to her funeral. I had never seen my kids so upset. They spread her ashes in the Puget Sound. I closed the office for three days. I couldn't get out of bed.

Five years later, I still miss Gloria. Every time I hear the Christmas carol, I think of her and what a person she was. She enriched us so by her dignity and strength, by her ability to smile and to manage to find humor in unfunny things so as to cheer us up. When I hear that carol, it's as if she's calling me from heaven, showering me with her love and strength.

I hope I was a good doctor for her. I held her chart on my chest while I thought about all this and rocked in my chair. I did all that I could, but her dying left me with a question I still can't answer. She died at 34. Why do things like that happen? I put her chart into the deceased file and notice another wet handprint on it and new wet smudges where I'd written, "Gloria! Glooooooria!"

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Lessons From the Practice

Courage

ANONYMOUS

She is 27 years old and has had systemic lupus erythematosus for 12 years. She has suffered through pneumonitis, pericarditis, cerebritis, hepatitis, thrombocytopenia, and osteonecrosis of the hips and knees. She has had a knee replacement, plasmapheresis, a splenectomy, and surgical debridement of large soft tissue abscesses. She would always say that she was lucky because her kidney function was good. The only thing she wanted was a baby—she knew the risks, but was willing to take them.

She couldn't do many things, but she loved life; her smile lit up the world of those around her. With the enormous medical bills, her husband couldn't buy her many of the things she desired. But she still loved to shop for shoes, clothes, and jewelry. Her appearance was important to her. Despite the ravages of her disease, she took pride in the parts of her body that were beautiful and untouched—her hands, face, and breasts. She cared for her skin meticulously with moisturizers and lotions. She had beautiful, delicate hands and enjoyed having her nails manicured and polished.

In May, her feet became swollen. Her desire to buy fancy shoes went away. Her gratitude for good kidneys was lost, as tests confirmed membranous glomeru-

lonephropathy. The risk of pregnancy became insurmountable. But she moved on with her life.

In July, anasarca developed. The joy of buying new clothes went away as she went from size 4 to size 10. She would look in the mirror and cry. But she adjusted and went on with her life. In October, the distal third of the left index finger became necrotic and, later, had to be amputated. The joy went out of buying rings and jewelry; she no longer had her nails manicured and polished. Everyone said that it was no big deal—that it was the left hand, anyway. That didn't stop her tears. But she adjusted and went on with her life.

The nephrotic syndrome and diuretics caused large fluid shifts. These, in combination with high doses of steroids, caused the development of striae. Her beautiful breasts became edematous and marred with striae, and her abdomen became a map. Still, she did not give in to despair—she went on with her life.

Today she, my wife, had a wide smile as she returned from Nordstrom. "Honey," she said, "look at my two new handbags."

She goes on with her life.

(Anonymous: Courage. West J Med 1996; 165:86)